

A: Good afternoon.

Q: Today is May 4th, 2017. My name is Helene Tishler. I'm here at the Newton City Hall Law Library with Dr. Gisela Morales-Barretto. Together, we're participating in the Newton Talks Oral History Project that is being conducted with the Newton Free Library, Historic Newton and the Newton Senior Center. Thank you for being here with us.

A: Thank you for having me.

Q: And we're very eager to hear about your experiences. So we'd like to start to find out about where you're from, when you came here, why you left, how old you were and so forth.

A: If I tell you how old I was, then you're going to figure out my age now. So thank you, to start, for inviting me. I am very happy to do this because as I was telling, Ann, I'm not doing this because I want to be in that cloud, you know, when you send it, the whole digital whatever you do...

Q: Yes.

A: But because I think it's important after being in this city, and in this country being in it for almost 38 years, that hundred years from now the information is there and available for people to understand where we are today and what has transpired at least in my 38 years here.

Q: That's wonderful.

A: So, thank you so much for the invitation. And I came in 1979, August 20th, landed here in the middle of the night and had no clue where we were because I had traveled to the United States since I was 11 years old but never came to Boston in those years, since 11 until 25 when I

arrived. We had had--we planned the trip and we landed believe it or not in Boston downtown in what was and still is Avery Street. But at the time it was a red zone, and we had no clue. The travel agent in Venezuela, in Caracas, had no clue. He looked it up in a book of those things, and he said, "Oh, there's a, you know, Central Hotel and it seems to be good because you can walk around." Well, when we landed there at 1 or 2 o'clock in the morning, what happened was the cockroaches were walking on the top of the bed. So we stayed all night sitting on the edge, me and my brother and my mother, who came to bring us, I came with my younger brother, and the cockroaches were on the bed. Oh, I mean it was a disaster. So at 6 o'clock in the morning, I'm looking at the yellow pages in the room, and trying to find a hotel. So we ended up at the Elliot Hotel, which is on Commonwealth Avenue and a safe haven and clean and no insects of any nature. But I distinctively remember sitting on the edge of the bed, watching the clock, two o'clock, three o'clock, four o'clock. I mean--

Q: Until you could get out of there.

A: Yeah, and you not able even to take a shower, nothing because it was like...

Q: So why did you leave Venezuela, at that time?

A: Yes, thank you. We left, or I left, because I had finished my degree in psychology three years before in 1976 and I wanted to do a clinical program. And at the time there were no clinical masters or that kind of thing in Venezuela, it was more organizational psychology, that kind of studies. And I was going to leave the year after, but my grandmother, my mother's mother, who raised me at home--they live with us--died. And so, my mother is an only child and it was very difficult, so it was postponed for three years. And I happen to have my--when I finish in '76, between '75 and '76, my clinical psychology professor had been here in Boston, and she recommended that I would come here because at the time--and she's still there by the way--she had been an associate professor of this program at what was then Boston City Hospital and it was

called The Minority Training Program. It was a psychology program, hands-on, at City Hospital, where you'd learn everything and anything that you can imagine. And she recommended that I would go there, that she was going to put a word out and blah, blah. So we landed. My brother had been accepted at Michigan to go to school there, so we made the first stop because it was August here. And we landed here and I had no clue where I was going to study. I came with no application, nothing, because I was going to look around to see what was here that I could do. And I landed first at BU to take some courses while figuring out what I was going to, and then was accepted in January of '78 to go to Boston College, which I want to make a point of this because it's very important that people understand how different the educational system is.

Q: Right.

A: For me, I love Boston College, but it was a waste of time because I went into a clinical program, a master's program, but I sat there with people who had changed their minds and they were English teachers or different--they had no clue, for instance, who Freud was, and it was like--a few years later I found out that I came really here with a master's already under my belt because of the European system in Venezuela, in the Latin American countries, and so I was doing a masters that didn't really provide anything new to me. But it was good, I had a master's from Boston College. And immediately after the master's I went to this program at Boston City Hospital.

Q: And how did you get to Newton? Through the Boston College--

A: No.

Q: No.

A: No. I have a cousin, and he had a friend who happened to be dating this lady from Costa Rica, who I still are friends with. We adored the family very much, and he said "Connect with Sylvia." And the next day when we moved to the Elliot Hotel, I called Sylvia, and Sylvia came. It was the first human being that really we could say hi to, or whatever, and she came to the Elliot. And her family is also an immigrant family here, and she came to the hotel, and the rest is history. We told her that we wanted to rent an apartment, and whatever, and we went to Brook House. And they would not rent us an apartment because we were Latinos, and they had a very bad experience with Latinos. So, out we went. And in those days, when you arrive in a new country, different language and you don't know what your rights are, what you are entitled to, or anything like that. So we went to Longwood, to the Towers, and we rented an apartment there. But Sylvia said, "I know this real estate person, why don't we go with him," and blah, blah, blah. Sylvia is a ver--she's a shaker and mover. And so, we landed, visiting with this real estate person who took us to Lyme Road. And very interesting--Lyme road was a piece of land that had been under this gentleman, you could probably find out who he was, and he died. And so the family, or whatever--

Q: It was the estate.

A: The estate, that's the word, thank you. They divided the land and made this street, Lyme Road, and they were finishing all these homes. If you go there, all that street, they were built in 1979. And so, my mother decided to buy a house and my brother stayed here and that was our entering into Newton.

Q: Remind me of the year again.

A: 1979.

Q: Okay.

A: Carter was--

Q: And you had trouble renting before that?

A: Yes.

Q: That's amazing.

A: Absolutely. And because of that--my mother is a lawyer, she's a very well educated lady and she couldn't believe the whole thing. And she said we're not going to call my father back in Venezuela, who didn't come at the time because he was a physician. And so, they decided to buy this house on Lyme, 43 Lyme Road, no, 34 Lyme Road, I'm sorry, 34 Lyme Road. And she said, "We're not going to put you through this, that somebody else is going to tell you, we cannot rent because we're Latinos."

Q: Right. Your English is very good. Where did you learn it and did you have difficulties when you got here?

A: I went to school in Venezuela. My parents were very...determined, I would say the word, that I was going to start learning English. We all--the three siblings--we were all going to start learning English from not day one, but very soon after. So I went to a bilingual school, here it's called the Ursuline Academy in Dedham.

Q: Yes, yes.

A: At home, it's the Merici Academy. And so I studied from seven years old until I was--until I graduated from high school with the Ursuline nuns. And so I earned--

Q: You had a good education. Was it still a difficult transition?

A: Absolutely. Absolutely.

Q: What was the the most difficult thing at the beginning? What did you find besides the cockroaches?

A: The most difficult thing was, shortly after arriving here, that it was not the same--I was not, for the outside world, I was not the same person that I was back home. I learned very, very soon after that I was a minority here, that I was different and that I had--in Venezuela I'm white, and I'm one of the bunch, I suppose. But here, when I went to school, when I went to work, you know, do my internship at City Hospital, I had to switch my brain and say, "Well, when you leave home you're a minority and when you come home you switch again and you're yourself." So that was tough. That was very difficult to get adjusted, and be reminded that that's who you were here.

The experience of coming here as a tourist--and we traveled here very much, since I was 11 years old, came to the States--very different when you're a tourist than when you come to stay and live. The good news, or not the good news, but the thing for us was that we were not supposed to stay here but two years. I was--when I went, I had two jobs back home and when I went to tell them that I was coming I was forced, not forced, but very forcefully trying to be convinced that I should not do that, that I should stay and blah, blah, blah. And one of them said, "Okay, you go two years and you come back and we'll keep the job for you." So I said to them then that I was going to come because I really needed to know--if I didn't do it, it was going to be always in my mind, can I do this, can I really leave? And the interesting part is that in Latin American culture, contrary to what the government here says, we do not leave. We were--you know, here people move from Arkansas to Minnesota, and they move to Florida--

Q: Right.

A: We're not like that. You were born and we live and we die in the same place. And even if you don't get married, more so, you stay with your parents, and you don't move. And that's the culture.

Q: Right.

A: So I come in here and get into that process. But knowing that I could move back, that I was going back, made it a little bit easier because I knew that I was always--I was being waited for back home.

Q: Yes.

A: And my father made it very clear too: "If it doesn't work, you come back."

Q: Did he come over too, eventually?

A: Well, I came here in '79. My parents moved here in 1999. My father decided to retire, and they came here in November 30th of 1999. And five months later he had a stroke. So that process took a while and he died in 2003. And he's buried next door at Newton Cemetery.

Q: I'm sorry, that's difficult. You mentioned some cultural differences, you know, living with your parents here, we move around a lot. Did anything else strike you then or even now about the differences?

A: Oh, every day it continues to strike--

Q: Anything really just stand out for you?

A: Yes, absolutely. Over time, from the very beginning, the value or not, here, of the elderly. How disposable in some ways elders are here. Not disposable, that's probably a very strong word, but for us, there's respect and the acknowledgement of the wisdom that they have. There's no such a thing as a nursing home.

Q: In Venezuela?

A: In Venezuela or in Latin America. That's for sure.

Q: That's very distinctive.

A: They stay home, you take care of them. And so for the last five years I quitted my job and I've been taking care of my mother. Because she's not going to a nursing home. So that's one big aspect. The other aspect that struck me and still today, but I have developed a way of going around that, is--and I also have found, what I'm going to say now, that it's not necessarily across the country here, because I have been blessed to visit--is the fact that people are very distant, don't cross my space. You see? If I would have come--this interview would have taken place back home, I would have come in into the room and say, "Hi, how are you?" and give you a kiss.

Q: Right.

A: And, "Hi, how are you?" and hug you or whatever, like I did with Ann when I arrived. But here it's like--

Q: Right, they have to know you better.

A: Yes. Yes. But the culture--it's that engagement and it's that warmth that is not here.

Q: What are some of the positive things that you found in America, Boston, Newton?

A: Oh my god, everything!

Q: Right. What strikes you as being a very positive experience? I know it was a difficult transition, but was there anything in school at the time, coming to Newton, your neighbors, any of the people?

A: Absolutely. We have made, I have made and we have made excellent friends here. When we moved to Newton the back neighbors, they used to see us from the window. And Mr. Siegel, Arnold Siegel, who used to live in the street over, he would say, "Who are these people that are--these young people that are in there?" So we became so good friends and they even visited in Venezuela, and very good friends with my parents and over the years, wonderful experiences with them. So that was--meeting people here and finding that. I think for me one of the blessings really was going to my church that I belong to, Our Lady Help of Christians, and the community that I developed there--with work, it was not easy. But when I got there I sang for 23 years in the choir, and I left when my father had the stroke because I couldn't manage the skill with work and doing that too. But when I joined the choir for instance, the same thing--distance, the distance. And then I turned around that place and everybody was hugging and kissing and you know--

Q: You changed the culture.

A: Yes, and I was the only Spanish-speaking person in that church for years and years and years.

Q: What about now?

A: Now it's a rainbow. Now you see people coming from India and their outfits they come to church. Africans come in with their national outfit. And I take time when I'm there to say how beautiful you look, how wonderful that you're here, very welcoming because I think that that is very, very important.

Q: And more Latinos?

A: Absolutely. The first time--I have been very, absolutely, very involved in my church and the first time that I was able to serve communion with another Venezuelan--

Q: That's special.

A: Oh, and I made a point of saying that to people, I never in my wildest dreams, I thought that I was able to be serving communion with another Venezuelan on the altar. Never. And now we have Venezuelans and Peruvians and you name it. Not only that, now we--one of the priests that doesn't speak Spanish but he can read it, he's baptizing in Spanish. And these people from Waltham come and they bring their kids because the pastor at the Waltham church doesn't want to do it. And they come to our church only for the baptism, but that's fine.

Q: That's wonderful, that's wonderful. What advice would you give someone moving here now from your country. I know it changed a lot in that time, but you've learned a lot in that time. Do you have advice that you would give someone coming here?

A: Absolutely. You have to be--you have to be aware that even though things have changed in the last 38 years, and even before, that you're different here and that you're going to encounter situations that are not pleasant. But that if you put the work, if you make it happen, you will find people, too, that are welcoming and that are supportive of that. [00:20:37] that people will see you--Newton has changed.

Q: Yes.

A: Very much. I have had situations here in Newton when I came that were not really happy ones. And at the very beginning, I was not able to speak up or say something. Now, that doesn't happen. I think that I'm a nice person. But I don't let people walk or--

Q: So is it because you become more Americanized or older or you just feel more comfortable speaking up?

A: I think all of the above--

Q: All of the above.

A: All of the above, yes. I think now, at 63 I have learned over the years to think that I'm not only doing it for me, but for the people that are coming behind me. And I--what I didn't feel then in term of, you know, proud--what I bring to the table, I feel now. And it's very emotional still. It's very hard because I see--I adore Newton. Absolutely. This is now in some ways home, but you always have the dilemma, that I call the immigrant dilemma. Actually, I have to be fair, it's not my phrase, it's the phrase of a good friend of mine. The immigrant dilemma is that you don't know where you belong after so many years. You're not from here and you're not from there. You see what I mean?

Q: I do.

A: And I see my nephews that were born here, but here in the schools, they have been bullied to the wazoo, you know, asking them, "Where's your father? Where does he cut the grass?" My oldest nephew is extremely bright, he's a gifted child, but he's also in the asperger's spectrum.

Q: Yes, yes.

A: And so he's not, you know, the middle of the road. He's different. So he has been bullied about that. And even though my brother and sister-in-law went to the school and talked about that, no reception whatsoever in trying to help about that.

Q: And this is in public schools in Newton?

A: Yeah, yeah.

Q: Oh my goodness. Okay.

A: Meadowbrook--

Q: Even now?

A: Meadowbrook Middle School, and Newton South and you name it. So it's--I mean, now they're out, but they both graduated only four years ago, five years ago. But it's sad, it's very sad.

Q: Yeah.

A: It's very sad.

Q: As much as we've changed--

A: Absolutely--

Q: --we have a lot of work to do.

A: Absolutely! And look what happened this week at Fenway. Look at what happened this week at Fenway. And it's, you know, people talk too much. People talk too much. "Oh, you know, Boston is not this. Boston, you know, this doesn't reflect Boston." No, it *is* Boston.

Q: [00:24:21] still felt that way.

A: Absolutely. Don't say that that is not Boston. It is Boston, and the problem is that we collectively forget from where we come from. This is not new, this is--go back to the Jews, when they were coming here and they were left in a boat out of Cuba to come to Florida and they were told to go back to Europe. And they were exterminated.

Q: The St. Louis...

A: Absolutely, and go back to the Irish and go back to the Italians. And then we forget very easily who this land really belongs to and why--people forget that there was sort of a Holocaust too here when the Native Americans were exterminated. And I feel offended but also extremely sad when I hear this president, Trump, saying he adores Jackson. Give me a break. He was an exterminator too.

Q: Yes. You know your histories.

A: Well, I told you that I have more histories.

Q: So you mentioned being torn between where your home really is--

A: Yes.

Q: --which I totally understand. Are there certain things we do have in common here with beliefs and practices that you had at home in Venezuela? Did you find some common ground that made you feel more comfortable? What might that be?

A: Venezuela has changed a lot today.

Q: Yes, yes.

A: It's a disaster zone. I don't think that today there is a country in the world that is going through what we're going through, because--not that I want to exaggerate it, but it's the truth--I mean, when you don't have food and you don't have medicines and you don't have the rule of law or anything. So I'm referring more to the principles and that kind of stuff because the Venezuela that I left doesn't exist anymore, unfortunately. But, yes, their common ground in the sense of that Venezuela with the one now, it was the education--value for education and value for principles in general of family and wanting the best for your family. That is common to everybody no matter where you are and that is valuable here. I think then the democratic system that I left in some ways, a lot of, you know, mistakes and flaws or whatever, but you were able to leave. And here people have that too as a common, you know...but it's difficult to compare because the food is different.

Q: Yes, sure.

A: The educational system is different--not that one is better than the other, but they're different.

Q: Right, right. And did you find being a woman in Venezuela getting the education was different from what you encountered here?

A: Yes, too, because in Venezuela women have...in some ways--it's a very good question, but a very complicated one to answer. In some ways, the women in Venezuela were recognized at the universities--they even were crowded with women going. My mother is going to be 88 years old in a few days and she was one of five women who got their doctorate in law. She has her doctorate in political science, and I'm talking 19-, let's see, 1950.

Q: Wow.

A: See, so, it has changed, it has changed. But, on the other hand, here we don't have anything, and this is, I think, important--I didn't know what sexual harassment was. We don't even have a word for that. Because you go and you walk down the street in Venezuela and they will whistle to you. And they will, you know, and it's not meant to be disrespectful. You know what I mean?

Q: Yes.

A: That's the kind of behavior that you're exposed to that here, you know, well...

Q: It would be something else--

A: Kill you--

Q: --it would mean something else.

A: Something else, and people can they lose their job over it. I learned about sexual harassment here. We don't have a lot there. You see what I mean?

Q: Yes.

A: But it was different, the connotation--very different.

Q: Different context there.

A: Very, very much, and you have to see everything in your--in its context to understand it.

Q: Right, right. So you have some very good childhood memories from Venezuela...

A: Yes...

Q: Is there anything particular you could share with us?

A: Oh, wow. Well...

Q: Something that still you think about or might affect your life?

A: Yes. Well, I think about many things.

Q: I'm sure. But if there's anything that stands out--

A: Yeah, there are two things that for me are fun. Well, three things. One, that I always say that I was raised in a swimming pool of love because I was raised by my maternal grandparents at home and my relationship with them, particularly with my grandmother, was very special, very, very special. I felt that she was the one who installed the seeds of what I am today. My mother was working, she had a big, big, big job and my father was a physician, so--and my grandfather used to--was working too. So I was home with her in the early years, so that ambience, it's part of who I am.

And there are two other things that--I remember distinctively the day my younger brother came home from the hospital when he was born. And that we all were around that crib, it was like this pool out of love for that baby that came home, scared to death, a baby crying, and crying and crying, probably scared to--I don't know if he was scared, but, you know, baby just born. And that memory for me drove many things after that in caring for people. I think that that was like the beginning of why I, even in the difficult times of my life, I reach out to people, I help people more than asking for help.

Q: Right.

A: And then there is an element that I went to kindergarten and there was another classmate of mine and he was five, and we were supposed to give a gift or whatever. And I told my mother to buy him a train because he liked trains. And his name, this little fellow, was Eduardo. So when my younger brother was born my parents asked me which name to give to the baby. And Eduardo is Eduardo because of that Eduardo. Well, this Eduardo from the train became--now he's the director of the Miami Philharmonic...

Q: Really?

A: He's now there and I see him, I watch him, I see him on TV and I said to him, "If you were to know that my brother's named after him" and those kind of things. And then, there are no coincidences in life. They say "Eduardo, never, I don't believe in that stuff." But, this Eduardo in Miami and myself we have a very--we have a common friend. We ended up having common friends, but we don't know each well. I know him from when he was five.

Q: That's amazing.

A: There are no coincidences.

Q: That's really amazing.

A: Amazing, yeah. But my brother is named after him.

Q: And your brother lives here as well?

A: Yes, yes, yes, yes. He lives in Oak Hill. So he's like a mile from my mother's home and I felt and I continue to feel that it's a blessing because he married a Venezuelan too and they had two boys and I was blessed, really blessed to be able to be part of their lives when they were growing up. So that for me has been amazing. Now they're--I don't see them and, you know...

Q: Oh sure. They grow up.

A: They grow up and it is what it is. But those years until they went to college I was--I went to the presentations at school, the parents thing...my sister was very open to invite me, so I was part of all that. So for me that was very special.

Q: That's wonderful. So you still have close family nearby.

A: Well, them, that's it. I have another brother in Florida and I don't see them that much because it's difficult. And he has two, a boy and a girl, and I try to reach out to them. But like, all of them, you text him [00:34:20] and have a good week, or whatever, and you never hear from them.

Q: Sure. Greater distances than what you grew up with.

A: Yes, absolutely.

Q: It's a lot different. So we've touched on a lot of things, and really you've shared amazing experiences since you've come here. Is there any question or anything else you would like to share and elaborate on that we didn't touch on from your experiences then, acclimating in America now?

A: Well, we have to have another interview. We have to have another interview because there are many things that I could think of, but...I wish that more people would come to the forefront and talk about these issues and tell it the way it really is.

Q: Yes.

A: I love politics and I watch CNN all the time, and I always say that you have to have the enemy close to you, know what he or she is doing, so I turn to Fox News to see what they're doing or what they're saying. And I say the enemy because I tend to be more into the social aspect of things.

Q: Right.

A: And I love politics, but the politics that is going to serve people, that is going to open up opportunities, that is going to be welcoming, that is going to bring development--

Q: Yes, progress--

A: --that we have a vision...

Q: Right, some progress--

A: Vision, vision, vision. And the people get too narrow minded in their politics to be reelected. And I am saying all that--and I wish I could say more, but I know we're short of time--that we need here in Newton to be more aware at the local level. We cannot change the whole world, but at Newton, we can. And we need to name the elephant in the room, we need to say as I wrote in the questions, it would be easier, I'm convinced of this, that we all have fears, we all have lack of information. And so I say, let's all say we're racist. That's being politically correct and humanly correct. And then because you are different, because I am fearful of who you are, and let's have a conversation. I used to run workshops about medical doctors. When you--and here you are and the rest of the world is not here.

Q: Right.

A: Let's bring it at this level and let's say to you, "Teach me, I don't know about your culture." And I would say, "Well, thank you." And you can ask me, "Teach me," but don't call me and tell me "How can we bring the Latinos that are hiding here?" because I have received that call, that are there to talk.

Q: Really?

A: Yes. "How can I bring people from off River Street in West Newton, where is my home, in West Newton now, where I have my house, and bring them to City Hall so that we can understand what they need?" And I said "Give me a break, put your shoes and go to them. You don't want them to come to you. If you're really interested, you know who they are and what their needs are. Go to them." You see what I mean?

Q: Definitely.

A: So go to the--don't tell me, "What are the needs of the elderly?" I have in my spare time, in quotes, go to make, like, sort of home visits from church to find out, and the poverty that is here in Newton, the people that are in need here in Newton, they're here, but nobody sees them. And I have gone to homes where the faucet is leaking, the husband of the lady is like this on his table--on his chair, like not being able to breathe over there. And I have called my pastor and I said "Can you send Gerry--" the person that manages the "--to help Mrs. such and such with this faucet because she doesn't have a penny and she needs this to be fixed." And I have called people here at City Hall and said "Could you please come and sit here and try to figure out what the deal is with the water because this lady cannot continue to do what she's doing."

Q: Right.

A: But, you know, it's very easy to *say*...And I will finish. I can continue on...

Q: No, no. There's a lot that you've shared and you've actually come here instead of our going to you, so we really--

A: That's fine, that's fine--

Q: --thank you for doing that.

A: --that's fine, but I will end by saying, reach out and touch someone. That was a commercial--

Q: Yes, we remember that--

A: --When I came there that was, reach out and go there. It's very easy to sit behind your desk here, and say "We need to work more." And when a problem-- "Oh, let's have a gathering outside, you know, by the flag and we are going to all pray for the people who were killed and

whatever, whatever.” Put your shoes or whatever you walk on and go to the people. Don't stay behind the desk because that's not going to solve the problem.

Q: Right.

A: And I thank you from the bottom of my heart for this opportunity.

Q: No, no, no. We thank you for sharing all this with us. It really means a lot. It does.

A: I know that it's--

Q: And now it's going to be here for posterity, and students will be able to see it and as part of this Newton Talks, you know, this oral project. Thank you for volunteering, really a pleasure meeting you.

A: I even said to my brother to do it because he has a lot of--

Q: So maybe get him to come in--

A: Well, he's so busy right now with work. He would only be able to do it on the weekends. And I know he's also like a history, like a military encyclopedia. And he would have information too.

Q: All right, all right, but thank you.

A: Thank you, thank you very much. Gracias!

Q: This is really amazing. Thank you so much.

END OF INTERVIEW